

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D-15

THE WASHINGTON POST
2 OCTOBER 1982

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Eclectic Airplane: The war in Lebanon proved the effectiveness of the Israeli Kfir jet, a hodgepodge of aircraft design the Israelis have been working on since about 1970.

The Kfir, which was supposed to be ready for the 1973 war but never made it into action, is based on a French Mirage airframe and powered by a General Electric J79 engine, the same power plant as in the F4 Phantom.

According to a CIA report, "The Kfir can fly at more than twice the speed of sound and can be used either as an interceptor or a ground-attack aircraft." The plane's development was set back for a couple of years while the Israelis reworked it to overcome the damage caused by an East German spy who had infiltrated the Israeli aircraft industry.

In their annoying way, the Israelis didn't tell the United States about their great new warplane. The CIA only learned about the Kfir when an internal Israeli message was intercepted.

One problem with the Israeli plane is its hotshot Israeli pilots. According to the CIA, the Israelis have a tendency to fly their planes beyond normal stress limits. In fact, the month after the Kfir was unveiled in 1975, one of the planes was lost over the Mediterranean when it "reportedly disintegrated while accelerating at high speed."

The Kfir's components are made and assembled in Israel under U.S. license. It is now a hot export item for Israel.

EXCERPTED